

ON THE POSSIBLE INFLUENCE OF BERTRAND RUSSELL ON B. F.  
SKINNER'S APPROACH TO EDUCATION

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Periodically throughout his professional writing, B. F. Skinner acknowledged his intellectual debt to various earlier writers. Francis Bacon, Ernst Mach, and Claude Bernard were all mentioned in this regard. Bertrand Russell appeared to exert a singularly important influence, as noted by Skinner: "I was drawn to psychology and particularly to behaviorism by some papers which Bertrand Russell published" (Skinner, 1978, p. 113). I recently came across the following quote that appeared in Russell's *Education and the Good Life* (1926), which illustrates how well some of Russell's ideas were congruent with those later advocated by Skinner:

I should have in every school a large bare room to which pupils could go if they did not want to learn, but if they went there, I would not allow them to come back to lessons that day. And they should be sent there as a punishment if they behaved badly in lesson-time. It seems a simple principle that a punishment should be something you wish the culprit to dislike, not something you wish him to like. Yet "lines" are a common punishment where the professed aim is to produce a love of classical literature.

Mild punishments have their utility for dealing with mild offences, especially such as are concerned with manners. Praise and blame are an important form of rewards and punishment for young children, and also for older boys and girls if conveyed by a person who inspires respect. I do not believe it is possible to conduct education without praise and blame, but in regard to both a certain degree of caution is necessary. In the first place, neither should be comparative. A child should not be told that he has done better than so-and-so, or that such-and-such is never naughty: the first produces contempt, the second hatred. In the second place, blame should be given much more sparingly than praise; it should be a definite punishment administered for some

unexpected lapse from good behavior, and it should never be continued after it has produced its effect. In the third place, praise should not be given for anything that should be a matter of course. I should give it for a new development of courage or skill, and for an act of unselfishness as regards possessions, if achieved after a moral effort. All through education, any unusually good piece of work should be praised. To be praised for a difficult achievement is one of the most delightful experiences in youth, and the desire for this pleasure is quite proper as an added incentive, though it should not be the main motive. ... Grave faults of character, such as cruelty, can seldom be dealt with by means of punishment. (pp. 172-173)

Here we see Russell urging elementary practices that later became hallmarks of some aspects of a behavioral approach to education, such as a preference for the liberal use of contingent social praise to reinforce accomplishments, the judicious use of time-out, and the avoidance or limiting of punishment. The extent to which Bertrand Russell's views directly influenced the development of Skinner's approach to education is unknown, but the parallels are striking and obvious.

## REFERENCES

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Received February 26, 2007

Final acceptance February 26, 2007

Action Editor, Patrick Friman

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doi: 10.1901/jaba.2007.40-587